

INSIDE THE OUTSIDE

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HMP Haslar is a low-status enclosure in the prison service estate. Remote and forsaken, an unimportant compound on the far side of the Gosport peninsular, it is a small, low complex of buildings behind a tall fence by the sea. One two-storey, red-brick block and a water tower are all that you can see as you approach — all else is rooftops and fences and the glittering wire.

“Name?”

“Jordan.”

“Correct.”

He smiles behind the glass. Mock-officious. My first encounter with an officer. He puts me at my ease. It seems dream-like now: a long view down a corridor which slopes to a gate of heavy iron bars. A figure, dark against window-light, watches my progress and nods as I pass.

There is a contradiction at the heart of Haslar prison. In Orwellian style, it has two names. I was asked not to refer to it as a prison, even though that's what it is. It has a tatty prison service flag on a pole in the outer courtyard and it is staffed by prison officers. But, despite the sign in the road outside saying “H.M. Prison Haslar”, its name was “Home Office Holding Centre Haslar”.

HMP Haslar is unique in the prison estate in that everyone confined there is an “immigration detainee”. Some of the men — who are not to be called *prisoners* — have been “held” for more than two years. They were sent to jail by civil servants. They have had no trial. The detainees in Haslar can be categorised by listing who is absent: there are no western Europeans, no white Americans nor Canadians, and no white Africans; there are no Australians, nor anyone from New Zealand at all, not even a Maori.

Perhaps that's why, during my interview for the post of Writer in Residence as part of the millennium Year of the Artist (YOTA) scheme, the illfated Governor McAlley (who was soon to be suspended from his post following allegations of bullying) described HMP Haslar as “currently the most politically sensitive prison establishment in the country.”

The detainees in Haslar live in dormitories. Within each dorm men live in cubicles — each cubicle has two beds, two lockers and little else. The partitions stop well short of the ceiling, so although only your cubicle-mate can see you, everyone can hear you. If the communal TV is on, if someone snores, farts or coughs — if someone prays loudly or cries in the night or talks — then everyone hears it. As one detainee cheerfully put it, “if someone masturbates and makes a noise everyone can hear”.

Symptoms of trauma — depression, anxiety and insomnia — are common amongst detainees. Restless at night, they add to the disturbance for the others. Exhausted by day, they lie in bed, facing the wall, as if trying to shut out the world. Some adjust, but others do not. The fortnightly visit from the Samaritans is a welcome break from routine, but as an approach to mental health care it is at best inadequate.

In winter the dormitories are cold. There are bars on the windows, but no curtains. Some detainees sleep in their clothes to keep warm. One slept in a communal area because it was warmer than his bed. The radiators are buried in the walls: perhaps to prevent immigrants from gaining access to Britain via the plumbing? Good to warm up the wall. Not so good if you wish to warm the room or its occupants.

So, in this gale-lashed prison — where, in winter, waves can make it over the sea wall, showering the courtyard with spray — there is only despair? *Not quite*. A natural solidarity unites the detainees. Men who shared no common language formed friendships. Warm non-verbal communication is the lingua franca of the immigration holding centre. Friends will often call each other by the name of their country of origin — it's an ironic humour — a gesture which does not define difference, but similarity. The ideology of mutual support knows nothing of difference. People are people, that is its message.

A prison is, by its nature, a totalitarian regime. There is an odd contrast between the cultures of the regime and of those it contains. *Each is very orderly*. On the one hand, the order of discipline; on the other, the order of mutuality. I found the commonwealth of the detainees more attractive, but that would surprise none

of the staff. There is a hard position to sell to a visitor. Many of the staff I spoke to seemed uneasy about locking up people who'd had no trial. It goes against the grain; it's not how our system works. And prison discipline is tough. It hands out punishments which seem peculiarly harsh when applied to refugees.

Where immigration detainees are involved, options for punishment are limited. There can be no loss of remission for a person who has not been convicted and sentenced. If a detainee has a prison job, you can take that away. If not, all you can do is move him to another prison. "Punishment moves" isolate detainees from their friends, and that's why such moves are so feared. Detainees who returned to Haslar from punishment moves to mainstream prisons — where they would live in a cell, either alone or with remand or convicted prisoners — would receive a collective welcome back into the comparative safety of Haslar.

Punishment moves appeared to be meted out on an arbitrary basis. One detainee went on hunger strike — which is against the rules — after he claimed he'd been tricked into signing voluntary repatriation papers by officials from the immigration service. "We have looked into all his complaints, so he has no reason to protest." So, he doesn't have to be repatriated? "Oh yes, he will have to go. He signed." First, though, he had to be punished.

A hunger strike is tantamount to mutiny. In this case it was a one-man mutiny, and the mental health of the mutineer was fragile. A psychiatrist advised against moving him, even to a prison hospital wing. Eventually he gave up his protest and then, after a couple of weeks or so, he was moved as a punishment: 23 hours a day on his own in a cell in HMP Rochester. What better way to test the determination of a vulnerable man not to commit suicide? When he was returned from Rochester, looking thin and pale and timid, he received a hero's welcome.

But why — in a prison that is a microcosm of the world — are there no interpreters? Helpful detainees interpret when they can, or no one does. "He signed when I wasn't there." So said the volunteer interpreter. Detainees are vulnerable to pressure from officials. When they are alone with staff their eagerness to please may cause them to sign anything.

"We get the bad ones here" — so said a prison officer — and, of course, in some cases he must be right. In amongst the victims of governments and wars, are there perhaps perpetrators, criminals on the run and the like? He was able to offer one example of a militiaman who had been involved in genocide. Whilst held in Haslar, his past had come to light. One amongst so many. But even the worst criminals deserve due process. Arbitrary imprisonment is still wrong.

Prisons are where people are punished and that hurts. A refugee may be able to prove that he has been tortured in the past — the scars on his body might show this — but he may not be able to prove his identity. So he will be detained. The way such prisoners coped inspired me — often on leaving work I'd feel elated — but by the time I reached home my mood would have changed. Beyond the cruelties of government policies, it was the lack of respect that really depressed me.

For example: I was in the education department. Yet again the room I had been promised was not available, so I had nowhere to work. Use the staff room, they said, no one will come in. *But they did.* I was with a detainee who was talking through a traumatic experience from his past. In the midst of this, one of the staff came in, laughed, and made herself tea. The prisoner kept talking. Surely time for her to retreat? *Not at all.* To avoid embarrassment, she talked over him. He was describing, in detail, a suicide attempt. He had never talked about this to anyone before. He needed to say it, so he finished his story, regardless of the intrusion.

Such everyday cruelties are reinforced by the complexity of Home Office rules and regulations. One day a prisoner showed me a letter he had received. He didn't understand it. The letter said the Home Office did not believe he came from the country that he claimed (country A). The letter went on to name the country they thought he might have come from (country B). His asylum claim was denied, they said, but he had a right of final appeal. If his final appeal failed he would be deported. The country he would be deported to was country A. How can you explain that?

One day a detainee begged for my help. He was about to be deported to Italy, as Immigration said he'd been there on his way to the UK. It was proven by fingerprints taken by the Italian authorities. He told me he'd

never been to Italy, and that if sent there he would be returned to Iran where he thought he would be killed. “They all say things like that,” I was told, when I passed on my concerns. The message was clear — “don’t get involved, it’s not your job”. But whose job is it? The “legal representatives” available to detainees are often of dubious provenance with questionable expertise, and no one in the prison gets involved with advocacy.

The detainee, who pleaded on his knees, was moved, prior to deportation, to Rochester prison. Then, after a total of seven months in detention, he was unexpectedly released. Someone had noticed an error. They had mixed up his fingerprints with those of someone else. He should never have been detained. He was given temporary leave to remain in the UK, but his terrifying experience of detention affected him deeply.

So, does anybody complain? One man did. He worked in the kitchens and noticed that food past its “use by” date was regularly served. His complaint was upheld. First, he lost his job. Then, one day, in the education department, an officer came and told him he had a parcel to collect. Would he mind coming immediately as it was in the way? He didn’t know it, but his possessions had been packed and transport was waiting to take him to HMP Belmarsh. *Belmarsh is a high security prison*. It wouldn’t normally expect to house a human-rights campaigner. When I asked why, they said he was a trouble maker. Mostly people don’t complain.

One evening a detainee I did not know wished to speak to me. He was young and it was his birthday. This had put him in an odd mood. He had something on his mind. “They will not tell you this,” he said, “so I will tell you.” It was the story of an escape attempt. A detainee had tried to scale the fences. My informant emphasised the hopelessness of the act — only a mad man would try it. Why did he do this, I asked? They want to send him back, was the reply. *All blood, all blood*. His awkward English did not mask the horror, but, rather, emphasised it.

Some time later I saw a report on a notice board in the education staff room. It described the escape attempt in detail. The detainee had a homemade rope. He’d climbed onto a ground floor roof and then gone through two coils of razor wire (called danett wire in the report). “He managed to get through the danett wire although he had cut himself severely whilst doing so.” He then scaled another fence: “...again he was badly cut by danett wire and as he got over the top of the gate he got hung up in the danett wire and twisted awkwardly, breaking his left elbow. He got down into the compound and was intending to make his escape in the south-east corner over the sportsfield fence which does not have danett wire. Unfortunately for him he was badly injured by this point and unable to proceed further.”

The blood of this man — who lay by the fence by the sportsfield gate — has become a part of Haslar now. Something of him has soaked into the ground. *But where did he end up?* An officer at Haslar who’d been in touch with a colleague from HMP Winchester told me he was taken to the casualty unit at the Royal Hospital Haslar. After that, he was taken to the hospital wing at Winchester. He spent a day there before being put into a cell on his own. “He sat in his cell and cried for several days.” That was the last I heard of him.

Some people were pleased at the harsh treatment endured by refugees in detention. I’d see their faces light up with pleasure when I said where I worked and what it was like there. Their assumption — fuelled by some newspapers — was that all refugees were bogus. “Oh good,” one woman said in a Gosport cafe, “I thought we were soft on them.” Many of the detainees in Haslar are from famously oppressive states and some carry proof of torture on their bodies. A refugee who must flee in the face of torture, or genocidal war, may not have legal travel documents to present to immigration officials on arrival in the UK. Fear can make a person tell a lie, or give a false name to an official, but that doesn’t mean the refugee is bogus. The role is assigned, by those hostile to refugees, but also by the systems refugees encounter when they reach Europe.

Since I finished my residency in HMP Haslar much there has changed — including the name. It is now called “Haslar Immigration Removal Centre”. The hope has been extinguished — if you go to Haslar it means only one thing — and that is more than some men can bear. In January 2003 an asylum seeker committed suicide. Mikhail Bodnarchuk, a Ukrainian, hanged himself early in the morning of the day he was to be “removed”. Despite the regular stories about asylum seekers, I don’t recall seeing it mentioned in the local news media.